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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 001611

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM PREL ET

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADERS TELL A/S CARSON OF ETHIOPIA'S  
DOWNWARD DEMOCRATIC TRAJECTORY

REF: A. 2008 ADDIS 1154

1B. ADDIS 898

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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11. (C) During his July 6-7 visit to Ethiopia, Assistant Secretary for Africa Johnnie Carson met with opposition leaders and Members of Parliament (MPs) to discuss the current state of democracy in Ethiopia, the role of opposition MPs, and the direction the democratization trajectory has taken in the past 15 years. Opposition MPs said that they feel "reduced to irrelevance" in Parliament because of procedural laws that do not allow for substantive minority representation. They reported that they are barred from meeting with their constituents, and that their constituents are penalized for electing opposition party candidates by being denied their fair share of relief/development aid and promotional opportunities. Several opposition leaders said there has been a regression of democracy in Ethiopia in the past decade as the ruling party pursues its agenda of "revolutionary democracy," which is not aimed at consensus but rather at creating a one-party developmental state. Opposition leaders requested that the USG urge the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to engage in dialogue with opposition parties to negotiate terms for the upcoming 2010 national elections. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On July 7, Ambassadors Carson and Yamamoto and EmbOffs met with the following political opposition leaders: Seeye Abraha (independent), Gebru Asrat (Arena Tigray), Bulcha Demeksa (OFDM), Tilahun Endashaw (SEPDU), Negasso Gidada (independent), Merera Gudina (OPC), Beyene Petros (UEDF), and Gizachew Shiferaw (UDJ).

Opposition MPs Feel "Reduced to Irrelevance" in Parliament

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13. (C) Opposition MPs complained that because of new procedural laws introduced following the 2005 elections, they are "reduced to irrelevance" in a "de-facto one-party Parliament." According to Beyene Petros, who has served in the past three Parliaments, opposition MPs cannot operate effectively in Parliament because they have no power to set the agenda and the reduced time rationing makes it difficult to convey their concerns. In the past few years, the amount of time an MP can speak was reduced from three minutes to one minute. While serving on committees, opposition MPs are in the extreme minority and do not have the power to influence the ruling party's decisions. Chairman of Oromo Federalist

Democratic Movement and MP Bulcha Demeksa said that there is personal animosity between the ruling EPRDF MPs and opposition MPs, and that they do not discuss issues openly.

**¶4. (C)** Asked whether they are able to effectively lobby for their constituents as MPs, independent opposition leader Seeye Abraha said that the reality was quite the opposite. He reported that constituents are penalized for electing an opposition candidate, and are often denied access to government services, relief, and development aid. Several of the MPs reported encountering major difficulties when trying to meet with their constituents in their respective constituencies, as government officials insist that the federal MPs have no business meddling in local affairs.

Democratic Regression

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**¶5. (C)** Several opposition leaders expressed that there has been a major backtracking of democracy in the recent past. According to Negasso Gidada, former President of Ethiopia and independent Member of Parliament, the situation began to deteriorate after the 1998-2000 Eritrean war, and further regressed following the 2005 elections. Opposition leaders reported that they are prevented from holding meetings with their members, even in the capital of Addis Ababa. Beyene Petros, chairman of the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces, said that the EPRDF's "revolutionary democracy" (Ref. A) is not based on consensus, but rather aims to create a developmental state run by one party. He requested that the USG try to persuade the EPRDF to sit with the opposition

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parties and negotiate election terms for the upcoming 2010 national elections. He added that currently, the Forum for Democratic Dialogue (a coalition of major opposition parties) has "no reason to believe that the 2010 elections are accessible."

**¶6. (C)** Acting Chairman of the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party Gizachew Shiferaw said that the most egregious violation of the rule of law in Ethiopia is the re-arrest of his party's Chairperson Birtukan Mideksa (Ref. B) and the prison administration's refusal to implement the court's ruling to release her from solitary confinement and allow visitation access to friends and family. Ambassador Carson said that he raised the issue of Birtukan with the Prime Minister and encouraged him to find a way to fairly resolve the issue. Ambassador Carson closed by emphasizing the importance of moving the democratization process forward following a transition of power, and not repeating the same mistakes as the ruling party.

**¶7. (U)** Ambassador Carson has cleared this cable.  
YAMAMOTO